

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Sarah Freyermuth

September 28, 2025

If you've ever thought "I wonder how Vicar Sarah writes her sermon," then today is your lucky today, because I'm giving you a peek behind the curtain! (And if you've never wondered that, maybe for my sake just pretend that you have for a few moments.) Because I'm training to be a Lutheran pastor, one of the first questions I always ask myself is: what is the Law and the Gospel in this text? Now this will sound familiar to you if you were at WPLC Basics class last week, but a quick refresher: the Law is everything that's broken in our world. It's what humbles us and guides us and brings us toward God because it helps us recognize how desperately we need God. The Gospel, on the other hand, is the good news: the reminder that we are loved unconditionally, that we are freely saved by God's grace, that nothing can or will ever separate us from God's love.

So when writing my sermons, I look for the Law and the gospel in the text, and I try to see how it can be applied to our world today. But the funny thing about this particular passage is that, depending on who you identify with, you might think it's either all Law or all Gospel.

I'll explain what I mean, but first I have a question – who do you identify most with in this parable? Do you see yourself in the rich man? Or do you see yourself in Lazarus?

If you identify more with the rich man, this story might feel like it's all Law.

We heard that the rich man experiences an extreme reversal: he lives in luxury, but after he dies he goes to Hades, where he is tormented and cut off by a great chasm. He begs for relief and even asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers, but Abraham refuses, reminding him that they already have the words of Moses and the prophets. And the most striking detail? In Hades, the rich man finally calls Lazarus by name. That single word reveals that the rich man had always known Lazarus, and yet had chosen not to help him. Even now, he still tries to command Lazarus as if he were a servant. It feels like there is no hope, no mercy, no grace for the rich man, and because there is no grace for the rich man, he isn't able to break out of his self-centered cycle of behavior. He continues to act exactly as he did on earth. It doesn't seem like there's any Gospel message here for the rich man, only Law.

If you identify more with Lazarus, this story might feel like it's all Gospel.

We read that Lazarus suffers in poverty and sickness, comforted only by dogs. But after his death, he is carried by angels to be in Abraham's κόλπος (kolpos). Kolpos is the Greek word that gets translated as side here, but could be better translated as Abraham's bosom or lap. Lazarus experiences an extreme reversal: from being destitute to being held intimately in Abraham's embrace. It's no accident that Lazarus is the only person in all of Jesus' parables that has a name, a name that is translated literally as "God has helped." Unlike the nameless rich man, Lazarus is known and honored. His reversal is pure Gospel: a powerful message of hope that says "no matter how poor you are, no matter how life has treated you, no matter how unloved

or unwanted you feel, you are loved and seen and held by God.”

So if we identify with the rich man in any way, this text might feel convicting and terrifying. And if we identify with Lazarus in any way, this text may feel vindicating and comforting. So where does that leave us? What’s the message we are all supposed to take from this story?

To answer that, we need to remember who first heard this parable and why Jesus told it. During Jesus’ time, Romans generally believed that wealth and faith were interconnected, that prosperity was a sign of divine favor and blessing. Within this reality, Jesus shares a long series of parables about the dangers of wealth, about the way that it has a tendency to warp us, to separate us from God and from one another. Right before this particular passage, Jesus had just finished telling his disciples the parable we heard last week, which ends with “You cannot serve God and wealth.” The Pharisees overhear this statement and ridicule Jesus and in response, Jesus tells this parable to prove his point.

Now it’s important to note that a parable is a teaching story, which means that Jesus isn’t making some sweeping claim about all of humanity here. He’s not saying that all rich people will be punished eternally or all poor people will be held to Abraham’s bosom. In fact if you look at the text, there’s no explanation for why the rich man went to Hades and Lazarus went to Abraham. Jesus is not using this parable to condemn, or judge, or make any claims about the afterlife—that’s not the point of this parable. Instead, Jesus is using this parable to tell us something about this life, about our life here and now. Instead, Jesus tells a story of two people whose worldly conditions

are so extreme they become caricatures, and then he shows that God has the power to reverse even these extremes. Lazarus and the rich man aren't meant to be truly relatable figures to those who heard the original parable or to us today. Most of us here today are not Lazarus—we are not completely destitute, completely forgotten, on the edge of death. But most of us here today are not the rich man either, living in unchecked luxury. We likely fall somewhere in between.

So if Jesus didn't mean for us to identify with the rich man or with Lazarus, then who are we meant to see ourselves as in this parable? I think we are the brothers—the ones who are still alive, still able to hear Moses and the prophets, still able to act.

Just as in Jesus' time, our society today believes that you can serve God and wealth simultaneously. Prosperity gospel theology—a theology that says those who are wealthy are blessed by God and those who are poor just haven't tried or prayed hard enough—has been woven into the very fabric of our society. Our society has conditioned us to treat poverty and illness as a personal shortcoming, as a lack of willpower, rather than a systemic failure. Our society has conditioned us to treat wealth and power as a personal victory, as a sign of intelligence, rather than a sign of systemic privilege. Our society has conditioned us to turn away from one another, because we expect that everyone should be able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Our society has conditioned us to place an emphasis on what we do instead of what *God* does through us.

And into this reality, Jesus' parable provides a powerful dose of both Law *and* Gospel. This parable acknowledges the Law, the injustice of the structures that bind our world—after all it was very similar structures that bound the world of Lazarus and the rich man. And this parable shows the Gospel, how God has the power to completely reverse these structures, to humble the rich and exalt the poor, to bring justice and mercy and grace to those who are suffering, to see and name the one who feels unloved and forgotten. This powerful reversal reminds us that even though we live in a world that tells us we need to earn everything, we are freely loved, freely saved, freely liberated by God's grace. This powerful reversal reminds us that even though we live in a world where our wealth and our worth are tied together, God breaks these systems apart when God gives us grace for no other reason than that God loves us, for no other reason than that we belong to God.

But more even than that, this parable shows us the Law and Gospel of how we are called to participate in God's reversal.

In the parable, Abraham says of the rich man's brothers: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Church, we know the Law, we see it all around us every day. And we know how we are called to respond. We have all the writings of Moses and the Prophets. We have all the teachings of Jesus, who died and rose from the dead. We know that Jesus said the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We know that Jesus said you cannot serve God and wealth. We know

that Jesus commanded us to love one another. But the Gospel here is that unlike the rich man in the parable, who has now passed away, who has an impassable chasm between him and Lazarus, who cannot change his behavior, we are like the rich man's brothers, who are still alive. We have been saved by God's grace so that we are free to care for one another differently here and now. We have been saved by God's grace so that we are free to see one another's humanity, free to love one another regardless of wealth or status, free to reach across chasms that feel impassable. We have been saved by God's grace so that we are free to turn toward one another, free to serve one another, free to give and receive and be in community with one another. This parable reminds us that our opportunity is now. It is not too late for us to see Lazarus. It is not too late for us to pay attention to the needs of the world around us. It is not too late for us to participate in the overturning of structures that separate us from God and one another. Not because we have to, but because with Christ's incredible love and grace, we are free to and called to. Amen.